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4-2011

### Rising Tides and Color Revolutions

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RISING TIDES AND COLOR REVOLUTIONS

by

Charles A. Mitchell

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Francisco Souto

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2011

# RISING TIDES AND COLOR REVOLUTIONS

Charles Alexander Mitchell, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2011

Adviser: Francisco Souto

My art is based on the argument that visual culture has a profound effect on society, and in turn, on our environment. The radical changes that will be necessary to produce a sustainable society and avoid a future of social inequality and climate catastrophe must be mirrored by equally radical changes in visual culture. These changes involve shifting the sociological sites for art to put culture back into service for the local, participatory communities that are our brightest promise in achieving a sustainable society. In an age beset by unprecedented economic, social, and ecological challenges no problem can be more vital. As plutocracies like the US and India militarize borders to keep out those dangerously tired, hungry and poor from the ravages of climate change, it is our responsibility, as citizens, to do anything we can to prevent these global apartheid.<sup>i</sup>

The Anthropocene is a geologic term that describes the current epoch as one in which human activity has encompassing and massively cascading effects on the environment.<sup>ii</sup> The unintended warming of the planet by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions is the most salient manifestation of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is only defined as such because of the sheer scale of human undertakings. The destructive consequences of the Anthropocene are simultaneously no one's fault and everyone's fault. Each of us is a participant in the cumulative effect. In contrast to the seemingly

modest mechanisms of climate change, the impacts are already, and will continue to be, huge. It is estimated that 350,000 people die from climate change related deaths each year. Over the next ten years, it is expected that 5 million will die from the impacts of climate change.<sup>iii</sup>

Analogously, the impact of visual culture on human behavior is magnified by the ubiquity of visual media. In art, no one is responsible for the predominant messages of visual culture, which are escapism and diversion.<sup>iv</sup> But when we choose to produce or consume media that do not confront the pressing issues of our day, we are complicit to the process of diversion. The systems of escapism we choose to engage with might seem trivial or lofty, but they produce, when aggregated, a society that can ignore the rampant injustices perpetrated in our name.

The destructiveness that characterizes the Anthropocene, like ocean acidification and mass species extinctions, is the result of a structured alienation between the rhythms and cycles of ecosystems and the constructed habits and desires of human processes.<sup>v</sup> This dissonance requires us to constantly intervene into the earth's metabolism to synthetically revitalize the land on which we depend. Industrially scaled monocultures are only maintained through ecologically damaging synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified crops. Our interruptions into the organic processes in which the earth replenishes itself is known as the metabolic rift.<sup>vi</sup> The metabolic rift designates both the primary decoupling between ourselves and our environment and the long-range consequences of that originary fission. Soil depletion, caused by monocultures and a lack of crop rotation, are an example of the initial split. The use of synthetic fertilizers, which create dead zones in marine ecosystems and directly damage human health, are a second



order consequence of the metabolic rift. And finally, the rising obesity and failing health of a population raised on the processed fruits of GMO monocultures may be seen as a third order consequence of the metabolic rift.<sup>vii</sup>

The rift between the needs of the environment and our use of it also has a corollary in art. Western art, like agriculture, has become isolated from metabolic lifecycles. Like the genetically modified corn that covers swaths of the Midwest, art has to be heavily processed before it can be consumed. Anyone can make visual stuff but that raw material is not valued as art until it has thoroughly traversed art's institutions. To be considered palatable, our society's art must be encouraged by teachers, accepted into galleries by curators and gallerists, and deemed valid by critics and collectors. The processing of visual works into officiated art strips away intention and value in favor of trends, in the first order, and encourages self-censorship and commodification in the second and third order.

It is reflexive to state that visual culture, as an endogenous element of society, has an effect on that society. It can also be conclusively posited that society has consequences on the environment that sustains it. From these premises, we can say that there is a causal link between culture and the environment, via society. From the perspectives of the Anthropocene and the metabolic rift, it is also arguable that the degradation of visual culture is analogous to environmental decimation. If the problems facing art both look like and produce ecological disruptions, it follows that a radical art practice can produce environmental solutions by mimicking those solutions. There are three key elements of viable remedies to the planetary crisis that can easily be applied to art. First, all actions must be taken from a position that is scientifically informed on the

consequences of those actions. Secondly, sustainable societies and cultures necessitate a greater level of participation from the public. Finally, we need to suture the metabolic rift by strengthening our local communities.

The first step towards sustainability is knowledge. The concept map that forms the foundation of this exhibition is a graphically organized representation of the factors and mechanisms of climate change as described in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's authoritative Fourth Assessment Report and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks. The sprawling and inclusive network is intended to provide a tool for the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of the problem of climate change. The allegorical characters that act out the concept map are playful visual aids. They emphasize that scientific understanding must be made accessible to the general public to be efficacious.

The process of enlightenment must also be accompanied by grassroots participation and organization. This installation is a loose collage of the spaces, events, and goals of a variety of local activist groups. It is arranged as a community center would be, to suggest the potential role activist art can play within local movements. Many of the elements in the installation are participatory (eat some food, take some seedlings, browse the books, or become a propagandist) in order to encourage participation in the activities that inspired the installation. If you agree with the intention of this exhibition, think about joining one (or several) of the local organizations highlighted in it. Many of these organizations directly reduce carbon footprints through lifestyle changes. More importantly, they are working to build the robust movements that can demand climate justice and neutrality.

A more informed and active public will naturally repair the metabolic rifts between art and society and society and the environment. My involvement with community groups here in Lincoln is productively and self-sustainingly intertwined with my artistic practice. Many of the objects I produce, such as the ideological plates, propaganda rack, and cycling hats, have been built with a specific organization in mind. Once these objects have been used as art objects, they can be recycled back into functional objects and used to further the goals of the organizations that grew them. These interactive sculptures can then fertilize those grassroots environments and inspire more action.

The socio-environmental challenges that we confront, and the urgency with which we face them, are without precedence or comparison. The need to do something, almost anything, to mitigate this headlong disaster has given me an appreciation for the frustrations, imperfections, and humble rewards of grassroots activism, human-powered transportation, and growing one's own food. In the same fashion, by putting art in service of the ideal of a humane humanity, I have learned to appreciate the simple, ham-handed, and imperfect visual media that characterize movement-building communities. These blemished aesthetics, which have informed my own work, resonate with the local, participatory, and informed communities that are our best hope for the future.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew Rothschild, "Interview with Gwynne Dyer," *The Progressive*, <http://www.progressive.org/radiodyer10.html> (accessed March 12, 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, "Bursting at the Seams," *BBC Radio 4*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2007/lecture1.shtml> (accessed January 15, 2010).

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<sup>iii</sup> DARA, “State of the Climate Report: Inaction to Kill 5 million – Mostly Children – by 2020,” *Climate Vulnerability Monitor* State of the Climate Crisis (2010) 1-2.  
<http://daraint.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Global-Press-Release.pdf> (accessed March 15, 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 26.

<sup>v</sup> R.K. Pachauri and A. Reisinger, eds., “Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report,” *IPCC Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007 AR4* (2007): 8-12  
[http://www.ipcc.ch/publications\\_and\\_data/publications\\_ipcc\\_fourth\\_assessment\\_report\\_synthesis\\_report.htm](http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/publications_ipcc_fourth_assessment_report_synthesis_report.htm) (accessed September 4, 2010).

<sup>vi</sup> Fred Magdoff, “Ecological Civilization,” *Monthly Review* 62, no.8 (2010),  
<http://monthlyreview.org/110101magdoff.php> (accessed January 4, 2011).

<sup>vii</sup> Chris Williams, *Ecology and Socialism*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 170-180.



















